

STRATEGY COMMUNICATION IN FAMILY OWNED RESTAURANTS: AN INFORMAL BUSINESS

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ABSTRACT

Many New Zealand restaurants are family-owned, operating along more informal lines than larger commercially operated businesses. This particular characteristic, and the volatile nature of the restaurant industry, can limit the ability of a business to operate profitably. It is therefore important for business owners to develop and implement strategies to remain competitive. However, informal modes of communication are likely to limit the successful communication and implementation of any strategies developed.

This study therefore examines strategy communication in a small selection of Auckland family owned restaurants, to determine the likely impact of family ownership on a restaurant business. Results show that strategy communication in family-owned restaurants is ad hoc, and owners often lack the skills needed for success.

KEYWORDS: Communication, diversity, family business, restaurant, strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The number of family-owned restaurants in New Zealand (NZ) is high and continues to rise; Lord, Shanahan, and Robb (2003) noted that 58 percent of NZ business firms were family owned in 2003, but by 2010, this had risen to 90 percent (Ministry of Economic Development, 2010).

Because the restaurant industry is complex and the business environment often volatile, owners need strategies to support their business goals, in order to be competitive. However, as most restaurants are family-owned, they may have informal modes of operation and communication, which may limit the development, communication, and implementation of strategies.

The study therefore aims to examine the ways family business owners in Auckland communicate strategies to non-family employees, to determine the impact of family ownership on a restaurant business. The study addresses four questions.

1. How do family business owners communicate strategies to non-family employees?
2. How do these employees interpret the strategies that the owners communicate?
3. How does a family business structure enhance communication?
4. What barriers to communication are encountered during strategy implementation?

For the purposes of this study, family-owned businesses are those defined by their owners as such, consistent with definitions used by Chua et al. (1999) and Westhead et al. (2002).

Literature review

Family business owners generally have significant operational roles (Dyer, 2003), especially around financial and managerial matters (Aronoff & Ward, 1995; Goffee, 1996). Approval for strategic decisions is easily sought, promoting the frequency and flow of communication around business functions (Massey & Kyriazis, 2007), and resulting in a less hierarchical and formal structure than is found elsewhere. Close relationships between owners and staff allow for frequent interactions, encouraging flexible rule setting and reducing the need for sophisticated monitoring and reporting (Bergin-Seers, Breen, & Frew, 2008). Information is shared informally and frequently (Chen & Huang, 2007; Moss & Warnaby, 1998), so employees can decide how to respond to situations as they arise.

However, as Massey and Kyriazis (2007) note, informal rules and ad hoc procedures can lead to confusion and misunderstandings around the division of tasks (de Vries, 1993). Furthermore, as unwritten rules can change according to circumstances (Gilsdorf, 1998), it seems likely that employees in family businesses may be uncertain about what they are expected to do and achieve.

Communication and strategy

Communication is a major influence on the success of strategy (Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002; Allen, Jimmieson, Bordia, & Irmer, 2007). Barriers to communication such as information quality, clarity of purpose, levels of trust between managers and subordinates, and cultural differences, can therefore severely impede strategy implementation, and therefore, business success.

If strategic messages are infrequent (Allen et al., 2007), confusing (Clampitt, DeKoch, & Cashman, 2000a) or simply not meaningful (Heide, Grønhaug, & Johannessen, 2002), implementation of strategy will be limited. Klein (1996) suggests that while managers may blame employees for mistakes, many problems are actually caused by a lack of accurate operating information (Klein, 1996). When employees are not inadequately informed, they may seek information from other sources (Allen et al., 2007) such as supervisors and co-workers (Yang, 2009), but if these sources misinterpret the strategic direction, confusion may be the result (Clampitt et al., 2000a).

Deliberate poor information sharing can also impede strategy implementation. Some managers share company-related information reluctantly (Clampitt et al., 2000a), or withhold vital information from non-family employees (Zahra, Neubaum, & Larrañeta, 2007). Consequently, employees may not understand their manager's expectations and goals (Gilsdorf, 1998), so although they may appear to do a good job, they may not actually know what they are supposed to achieve (Quirke, 1996).

Kaplan and Norton (2001) argue that effective strategy planning requires a shared understanding of purpose and values, which can only be achieved by sharing vision and goals. However, Tagiuri and Davis (1992) suggest that some managers lack organisational direction because they do not articulate or even understand their true goals. Analoui and Karami (2002) note that a clearly-defined mission is needed before developing and planning strategies. A mission statement serves not just to guide the implementation of strategies, but also to enable a sense of shared expectations and an understanding of strategic messages (David, 1989).

Cultural backgrounds influence beliefs and values, and shape behaviour (Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004). Although diversity promotes diverse perspectives and skill sets (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007), it can also lead to communication difficulties, misunderstanding, and interpersonal conflicts (Nam, Lyons, Hwang, & Kim, 2009). According to DeVito (2006), employees may have problems interpreting messages due to language barriers, jargon and complex terms. Communicating in a common language is therefore an essential component of effective strategy communication (Marschan, Welch, & Welch, 1996).

Parsa et al. (2005) found that successful restaurants have well-developed concepts (rather than just a commitment to a food type), suggesting that family restaurants with poorly developed strategies may struggle to survive.

Summary

As family-owned restaurants are common in New Zealand, it is likely many restaurants have poorly developed strategies, poor information sharing, and misunderstandings around operating procedures, caused by language and cultural barriers. While the literature recognises the importance of communication in supporting strategies (e.g. Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002; Olson, Slater, & Hult, 2005; Quirke, 1996), these are unlikely to be implemented if the informal nature of a family business limits effective communication.

METHODS

Research approach

Grounded theory was chosen as an appropriate approach, as there was no hypothesis to test. An inductive approach to analysis was used, drawing conclusions from the data to explain the phenomena that emerged (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Induction helped to develop an understanding of the communication processes in the study, by establishing links between strategy communication and interpretation.

Sampling and recruitment

Ten participants were interviewed, comprising five family restaurant owners and five employees. Recruitment was limited to restaurants considered by their owners to be family businesses; the owners interviewed were family members, and the employees were non-family. Participant selection was by snowball recruitment, using personal contacts for the first participants. Of the 25 owners and seven employees initially contacted, two owners and five employees agreed to participate, and generated referrals for subsequent participants. While this sample is considered sufficient for a small exploratory study, caution should be exercised before generalising results to the wider population.

Data collection

Data were collected using face-to-face interviews. Non-sequential questions explored participant responses as appropriate, and solicited specific information in response to the phenomena as they emerged (see Bryman & Bell, 2007). An interview guide outlined essential topics and ensured the main research questions were adequately addressed (see Kvale, 1996). Questions were modified as the process developed, until no new information emerged, and responses repeated those given in earlier interviews. At this stage, data were considered to have reached saturation, and no further interviews were sought.

Data analysis

Applying the grounded theory approach, data were analysed in two stages of familiarisation and coding. During familiarisation, responses were reviewed several times, and as themes emerged, these were highlighted and coded. Data collection and analysis were concurrent, so that as themes emerged, these were used to develop subsequent questions. Explanations for themes were sought in the literature, and by asking subsequent participants about experiences not discussed in earlier interviews. Grounded theory, rather than a content analysis approach was selected. While a content analysis approach could also have been used, it was decided to use a grounded theory approach, as

RESULTS

All the owner interviewees were males, and generally better educated than the employee participants. Employees comprised an even balance of men and women, and were younger than the owners. One was tertiary qualified, and their countries of origin reflected the ethnic diversity of Auckland's restaurants (data not presented). Data presented in

Table overview participants and their businesses.

Table 1: Business And Interviewee Profiles

Interviewee	Role	Tenure	Ownership
Owner 1	Owner-manager	3.5 years	Husband & Wife
Owner 2	Owner-manager	10 mths	Family
Owner 3	Owner-manager	4 mths	Brother & Sister
Owner 4	Owner-manager	1.5 years	Husband & Wife
Owner 5	Owner	50 years	Family
Employee 1	Assist. Manager	1.5 years	Husband & Wife
Employee 2	Waitress	1.5 years	Husband & Wife
Employee 3	Waitress	2 years	Husband & Wife & Relative
Employee 4	Head Chef	8 years	Sole Ownership
Employee 5	Waiter	4 years	Husband & Wife

Several themes emerged for each research question, and are presented in the following section.

STRATEGY COMMUNICATIONS

Creating strategy awareness

Owners achieved strategy awareness by communicating their vision and business history.

[Strategy communication is] a matter of saying 'we want to make our place different; we want to make people come here because of the difference and because of our background, and because of our history, because of our story, because of our food' ...

Because strategies were mostly communicated when something such as a food price or promotion was changing, strategy development and communication tended to be reactive. Notes or emails were used to announce promotions or events, although written communication was sometimes avoided. As one participant explained, written instructions were not always needed, because in a small business, managers and employees could interact easily.

Owners recognised the importance of training to develop strategy awareness, and to promote a shared understanding of operations. Some reminded staff of their tasks, or asked if they needed clarification about operations. Strategy communication was therefore described by employees as 'instructive and demanding', 'telling staff on the spot', and 'telling staff what to do and not to do', rather than as a formal process.

Training helped ensure employees understood and implemented strategy correctly. Although the owners did most of the training, consultants were also used.

We have a lady that comes in and does training every month. ...we find that we get better uptake on that, people are happy with that, the lady is very good and she will work out there and will watch for a while and then pick up on them...

Monitoring and controlling

Owners monitored activities to ensure they met their expectations, describing this as 'having an eye on everything', and 'correcting mistakes on the spot'. Consultants were also used to monitor activities undercover.

We get mystery shoppers... and we get a report every month (on) what their finding was.

Bonuses and rewards helped ensure strategies were implemented and standards maintained.

I'd run a competition, you know. Average spend was \$27 last Saturday night. Let's see if we could get it up to 30...

The use of checklists and manuals helped ensure procedures were followed, and meetings were used for feedback and evaluation. Checking was sometimes covert, as one employee explained:

When there is a new staff and they want to know that the new staff can do the job well, they will try to check the cafe randomly by phone or asking every couple of hours...

Strategy interpretation

Employees who were unsure of strategies explained that they tried to understand what to do by asking questions or watching others. Some asked owners to clarify strategies or instructions...

I ask them to give me some example and sometimes I ask them to give me some reasons regarding what may happen next...

...while others asked colleagues, especially if language differences created problems.

I would try to find out from someone else. If I am still unclear then I will go to the boss. But that hardly happens because the other person usually knows more because they speak the same language.

Others watched their colleagues to see what to do...

I observed other people doing the job. I observed what happened if they took it wrong and when I got things wrong, they told me off, so I just learnt the rules.

In some ways the family business structure seemed to support strategy communication, because employees often had close working relationships with their owners, so could ask for direction as needed.

Family structure and communication

The impact of the family business structure on strategy communication was also determined by looking at the lines of authority and interactions between owners and employees. As expected, decision-making was largely the domain of the owners.

Decision making authority

Although employees were not involved in all decisions, owners reported that employees' ideas were often implemented.

Thing like menus, I get the staff (and) say, 'You come up with an idea...play around with it a little bit ...

However, the owners had the ultimate authority, and managers who were not part of the family had limited power.

I cannot actually just bring something new and just put on the menu or whatever. We need to talk to the boss first so he's the person who decides everything.

One employee seemed to find the lack of autonomy particularly frustrating.

Every plan or suggestion that I make has to be discussed with them to check whether they are going to like it or not.

Overall there was little opportunity for employees to contribute to decisions, and they were limited to routine matters such as stock management, and resolving customer problems. Several owners confirmed their need to maintain absolute control.

Strategic decisions (like) whether we're going to change the menu or something like that ...we needed the central control.

The value of family was apparent in both owners' and employees' responses, illustrated by owners' comments such as 'we are a big family', and 'there is no us-and-them'.

We don't have an 'us and them' type mentality people are working for us but we take them under our wings... The culture here is fun.

Employees also described similar styles of relationships: 'in the restaurant we're like one big family'.

Barriers to strategy communication

Three barriers to communication were identified: inconsistent information, differences of opinion, and language problems.

Clarity of purpose

Miscommunication and misunderstandings between owners and employees were common issues faced by participants. Employees were frequently confused by inconsistent information or instructions, and one complained of owners that ignored their own rules, and had no clear, reliable procedures.

They change their mind all the time. I have to always keep up with their decision-making. It's not too much for us to bother unless (it's) a major change, but they just tend to change their minds about food prices/

Inconsistent communication of business vision and goals evidently created confusion.

I've always thought like that their main goal was to have excellent customer service but I am kind of thinking that they have forgotten about that and their main concern is getting as much money as they can.

Diversity of culture and language

Language difficulties and miscommunication were common, especially where owners had limited English; however, not all difficulties were language-based.

We come from different background, different perspectives. Even though we speak English, we still come from different countries.

Although the close relationships between family and non-family members allowed open communication and information sharing, some recognised that inconsistent information, individual values, and language problems all created barriers.

Differences of opinion

When employees disagreed about how to operate the business, they found it difficult to establish a shared sense of purpose with their owners.

There are some things that they don't realise about the nature of a cafe, about the nature of food; they don't understand what they are doing wrong.

We don't have same perception about how to manage the cafe. For example, my managers think that everything is easy to implement but in the real practice, it's not quite (so) easy.

DISCUSSION

Strategy communication

Creating strategy awareness

Owners discussed the vision and mission of their businesses more than the strategies themselves, suggesting that they understood the importance of integrating vision into strategy, or at least sensed a relationship between the two. Quirke's (1996) finding, that strategy communication will be weak if managers think of strategy as an event, rather than as a process, was confirmed. To be effective, strategy communication needs to support a vision (Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002), but without a strategy to implement the vision, there is nothing to communicate to help employees understand the values, direction and goals of the business (Wilson, 1992).

Monitoring and controlling

Controlling activities such as monitoring, training, and the use of manuals and checklists, were all used to support the implementation of strategy. However, in the absence of well-developed visions and strategies, enforcing discrete operational processes was possibly efficient, but not particularly effective. Strategy awareness was therefore limited by the absence of a strategic vision at ownership level, and compensated for with monitoring and controlling, which helped ensure employees' activities conformed to the owners' ideas about how things should work.

Strategy interpretation

Clarification

Strategies can be implemented most effectively if managers and employees have the same understanding of strategic objectives (Clampitt et al., 2000a; Quirke, 1996). In this study, employees unsure of strategies sought clarification from colleagues and managers to ensure they were working in accordance with what was expected. While this was not ideal, open communication between managers and employees seemed to promote discussion between employees and managers on strategic issues, helping to clarify business direction.

Observation

Consistent with the findings of de Stobbeleir et al. (2008) and Yang (2009), employees used observation to understand strategies, as they had a poor understanding of what the strategies actually were. They interpreted strategies as instructions based on 'to-do-and-not-to-do' orders or as rules to follow, rather than strategic action plans per se. This explains one employees' observation, that understanding strategies was achieved through 'learning-by-doing', (i.e., making mistakes and being corrected when actions did not support strategies). Interpretation of strategies was considered problematic, evidenced by the need to ask for clarification, or watch and copy others.

Family structure and communication

Decision-making authority

Allio's (2004) finding that family-business owners are the central decision makers in their organisations was supported. As expected, centralisation applied only to major decision-making, as employees had authority to make minor decisions. The argument that centralisation makes communication among members restricted, inflexible, and relatively slow (Chen & Huang, 2007; Kelly, Athanassiou, & Crittenden, 2000) was not supported however, because of the frequency of interactions between owners and employees.

Patterns of interactions

The presence of family enhanced the closeness of relationships, and gaps between managers and staff were reduced by the frequency of interactions made possible by the small size of the businesses and direct involvement of owners. Frequent interactions promote the sharing of strategic information and enhance the implementation of strategy (Malina, 2001). In addition to the informal family work environment, open communication and social activities were used to promote a sense of belongingness and reduce divisions between family and non-family.

The modes of communication evident in this study were consistent with Bergin-Seers et al.'s (2008) and Brownell's (1993) findings that informal communication is prevalent in family businesses. The poor quality of strategic vision and lack of employee autonomy may therefore have been compensated by the quantity of communication.

Barriers to strategy communication

Clarity of purpose

A mission or vision statement that is too generalised can result in ambiguity of a company's goals. As a consequence, when managers develop new tactics to respond to the changing business environment, employees will perceive managers as inconsistent and confusing in their communication of strategies.

Communication issues in this study related to inconsistent information, differences of opinion, and language problems. Inconsistent information particularly limited the effectiveness of communication, and not surprisingly, created confusion around what to do.

Diversity of culture and languages

Language differences acted as barriers to communication, particularly in multi-ethnic restaurants. Employees with language problems who do not understand strategies, may be reluctant to ask for detailed explanations if the managers' English is weak. Strategy misinterpretation is therefore likely to be greatest where language differences exist, and not surprisingly, misunderstandings around strategies are known to limit their successful implementation (Rapert, Velliquette, & Garretson, 2002).

Differences of opinion

Some employees had difficulty aligning their values to those of the managers, especially around strategic issues. Nam et al.'s (2009) observation that different individual perspectives leads to communication difficulties, was unfortunately confirmed.

Summary

Effective strategy communication was not demonstrated. Even though owners used various approaches to disseminate their ideas through manuals and interactions with staff, inconsistent messages limited the employees' ability to understand the direction of their business. Strategy implementation was therefore considered weak.

Most owners viewed strategies as tactics or spontaneous actions, rather than as action plans for implementation at various levels of their business. Descriptions of strategy (sic) formulation as 'ad-hoc' and 'on-the-spot' were consistent with Clampitt et al.'s (2000a) definition of tactics, in that the so-called strategies were formulated spontaneously and reactively. Furthermore, the strategies that did exist were barely formulated. Although some owners discussed tactics to improve sales (e.g. up-selling beverages) or work efficiency (e.g. introducing new billing procedures), common business strategies such as cost leadership or differentiation strategies, were not apparent.

While strategies are static and need advance planning, tactics are merely reactions to a changing environment (Clampitt, DeKoch, & Cashman, 2000b). Only one owner acknowledged the existence of business and functional strategies and discussed proactive strategy development.

The dearth of business strategy and functional strategy development can be explained by the owners' involvement in their businesses. They were not just shareholders, but managers responsible for operational functions (e.g. marketing, human resources, purchasing, finance), as well as for their family and staff.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Overview

Three major findings emerged from this study:

1. In family businesses, strategy formulation and communication are likely to be ad hoc, with tactics being more common than strategies per se.
2. The modus operandi of a family business is also likely to be ad hoc, dominating activities, and affecting its ability to be competitive.
3. Small family businesses may lack specific goals or direction.

The lack of strategy formulation in small family businesses suggests a lack of other business skills, putting family businesses at risk of failure. Free labour provided by family members may compensate for a lack of business skills and strategies until fatigue sets in, but working owners are likely to become exhausted, resulting in ownership changes or bankruptcy.

The use of tactics in lieu of strategies appears to arise from the informal nature of activities, suggesting either that owners lacked basic business skills, or did not think strategies were important. Either way, the lack of formal strategy formulation and communication was likely to limit their ability to manage their business competitively. Family businesses with informal goals will need to balance their lack of business skills with some other advantage, in order to stay viable. While the obvious advantage is 'free' family labour, the associated fatigue may help explain why many small family businesses do not survive.

Parsa et al.'s (2005) data from restaurant failures in Georgia (USA) explains that conflicting family demands are a common cause of family business restaurant failures. They estimate that 30% of family businesses fail in three years, but 61% of independently operated restaurants (including family businesses) fail in their first year. Notably, the smallest and least complex restaurants in their sample were also those that remained open the shortest time. Their observation that successful restaurants have well-developed concepts (rather than just a commitment to a food type) further demonstrates that restaurants with poorly developed strategies will struggle. Using data from the Restaurant Association of New Zealand, Pearson (2010) calculated that 75% of restaurants in New Zealand fail within four years, and those that survived were deemed successful. However, for all of them, profitability will be limited to around 5% (Neill, Williamson, Waldren, & Bennett, 2011).

Summary

Owners of family restaurants do not necessarily recognise strategies as action plans. Strategies in these organisations exist in the form of tactics, which are developed unplanned, spontaneously, and in reaction to circumstances. Responses from participants showed that the tactics were instructions based on to-do and not-to-do principles. This particular pattern of communication seems to be influenced by the structure of the family organisation. Family businesses are often small in scope and activities, allowing owners to 'play' at multiple roles, including owner, manager, financial controller, marketing strategist, and human resource director. Consequently, a formal formulation of business and functional-level strategies was not evident. However, the family culture served as an informal control tool that helped align employees' behaviours with the general direction of their organisation.

Implications

As formal strategies are unlikely to exist in small family restaurants, employees may become passive in their contribution to the business, especially as their ability to be actively involved in strategic decision-making is limited. Owners' weak understanding of the need for well-developed strategies will limit their ability to maximise profitability and growth, resulting in many cases, in uncompetitive businesses. It is therefore recommended that family business managers improve their skills and knowledge of strategic management through study, collaboration with strategic experts, or networking to share knowledge with other practitioners.

Despite the important role of vision in supporting strategy communication, family businesses are likely to have ambiguous vision and mission statements, leading to confusion about what they want to achieve, no doubt exacerbated by the owners' tendency to inconsistent behaviours in reaction to a constantly changing environment. Employees need a well-defined vision and mission statement, so they can have a shared understanding of the purpose and long-term vision of their business. Socialisation tools (e.g., staff orientation, training, and frequent interactions with staff), monitoring, and controlling of employees' behaviours are helpful in this respect. Managers who use these tools and establish a culture of trust are likely to see benefits in a cohesive approach to strategy implementation.

Future direction

The existence of tactics as strategies in small family-owned organisations was pervasive. It would be interesting to investigate the types of tactics likely to be developed in family businesses and the significance of these in relation to attempts to maintain competitiveness. Questions related to the participants' perceived meaning of strategy and the effectiveness of current strategy communication practice need to be included in future studies. The development of these questions may reveal business strategies that this study has not yet identified and may help indicate how effectively strategy communication is practiced in organisations. Finally, it would be beneficial to examine the practice of

strategy communication in a comparative study of family and non-family businesses, to confirm the influence of family on a small business.

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